

The Evening Star, August 15, 1873, p. 2
The Wawaset Disaster

Elsewhere will be found a temperately written communication deprecating a hasty prejudgment in regard to the *Wawaset* disaster. In a contemporary, however, we notice a communication written with more passion than discretion, in which the writer roundly rates the critics who have censured the management of the *Wawaset*, as belonging to the class of "street corner major generals who, with the fate of the battle decided and the position of troops defined could point out the reason why it was lost and won." The writer sneeringly suggests that the Potomac Ferry company should secure at any cost the services of these critics as officers for their next boat. This sort of defense of the steamboat company is decidedly ill-timed and ill-advised. The company, and the officers of the *Wawaset*, have been treated very fairly and leniently by the press, and every fact going to their credit has been promptly stated and accorded its full weight. They cannot expect, however, that a disaster involving the appalling loss of life, near shore, in the still waters of a river, can pass by as an ordinary casualty demanding no inquiry or discussion as to the causes, and the means of averting future calamities of the same kind. There will be many opinions and suggestions put out, some of them crude enough, doubtless, but all serving to give the views of the people upon a matter in which the whole community is directly interested. And it will not do to sneer at the critics as of the class of corner major generals who know nothing about war. In these days, when captains run their steamers across the Atlantic at full speed in a dense fog, and go to bed when approaching land; when engineers let the engines run themselves while they sub for the barkeeper; and when firemen leave their fires to seek cool breezes, and social converse with the deck-hands, the question may be fairly raised whether the biggest land-lubber that walks couldn't run a boat with approximate ability and discretion.

The writer, while dealing with the various offenders who have presumed to hint that there might be something wanting in the management of the *Wawaset*, takes exception to an editorial in *The Star*, to the effect that "there should have been some officer on the boat having nerve and discretion to stand, pistol in hand, by the life-boats, and see that they were properly lowered and the helpless women first put on shore." He cannot see how Capt. Wood could be in two places at once, at the life-boats and at the bow, where he was "giving his attention to the wheel-ropes, by which means alone the vessel was brought into shallow water," and he adds, "let us have no more visionary suggestions for saving human life." Now, our suggestion was not at all visionary, but was made in the light of the fact that in almost every instance where there has been any number of lives saved from burning steamers, it has been done by reason of the officers of the vessel stationing themselves by the life-boats and either by presented pistol or other stern means of enforcing discipline; preventing a mob of selfish and excited men, crew or passengers, from trampling down women and children, and seizing the boats, as was done on the *Wawaset*. It is not necessary that the captain should have the gift of ubiquity to do this. He is supposed to have mates or assistants to share his duties, and either he or his second officer should have been at the life-boats to see that they were properly lowered, and the women and children first put in them. And the remarkable assertion in defense of the captain that his whole duty in such an emergency consisted in watching the wheel-ropes to see that they did not take fire, raises the damaging enquiry why these ropes were of inflammable material? Why were they not of wire or iron, as is the case on any vessel deserving to be trusted with human life? On the whole we think the steamboat company will do well to present their case through advocates having more discretion if less zeal than the writer, who, oddly enough signs himself "Justice."